

**EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT
ROUTING SLIP**

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Executive Secretary

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United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

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February 12, 1985

MEMORANDUM TO DISTRIBUTION LIST A

FROM: S/LPD - Otto J. Reich *OJR*

SUBJECT: Public Opinion Polls on Central America;
News Item on Nicaragua

Enclosed are some items of interest we thought you might like to have:

1. In several polls taken from May 1983 to November 1984, you will see that support for U.S. aid to the anti-Sandinistas in Nicaragua has risen steadily from 25% to 49%. The second poll summary, dealing with El Salvador, indicates that support for increased military assistance to that country has also risen gradually from 22% in May 1983 to 32% in February 1984.

2. A recent article by Humberto Belli, entitled "Drifting Toward Totalitarianism: A Report on the Nicaraguan Elections," reviews the many ways in which the Sandinistas manipulated the electoral process, making it impossible to have open, fair elections in November 1984. Mr. Belli also discusses the methods the Sandinistas are using to tighten their control: eg. press censorship. Mr. Belli had much personal experience with press censorship, since he was once the editorial-page editor of the independent Nicaraguan newspaper La Prensa. Having once supported the Sandinistas, Mr. Belli became disillusioned and finally left Nicaragua in 1982.

Enclosures:
As stated.

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SUMMARY OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS
MAY 1983 - NOVEMBER 1984

NICARAGUA

May, 1983

Los Angeles Times poll asked respondents whether "the CIA should support an invasion of Nicaragua to overthrow the leftist government there."

| | |
|------------|-----|
| YES | 10% |
| NO | 62% |
| NO OPINION | 28% |

Gallup/Newsweek poll asked: "Should the United States be giving assistance to the guerrilla forces now opposing the Marxist government Nicaragua?"

| | |
|------------|-----|
| YES | 25% |
| NO | 56% |
| NO OPINION | 19% |

April, 1984

A CBS/N.Y. Times poll asked, "The Reagan Administration says the U.S. should help people in Nicaragua who are trying to overthrow the pro-Soviet government there. Other people say that even if our country doesn't like the government in Nicaragua, we should not help overthrow it. Do you think we should help the people trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, or not?"

| | |
|------------|-----|
| YES | 27% |
| NO | 55% |
| NO OPINION | 18% |

October, 1984

CBS/NY Times poll: "Do you think the United States government should provide military assistance to the people trying to overthrow the pro-Soviet government of Nicaragua, or not?"

| | |
|------------|-----|
| YES | 30% |
| NO | 44% |
| NO OPINION | 26% |

November, 1984

Lou Harris poll: "Step up the CIA assistance to the rebels in Nicaragua who are fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government there?"

| | |
|----------|-----|
| YES | 49% |
| NO | 39% |
| NOT SURE | 12% |

EL SALVADOR

May, 1983

Response to a Gallup poll asking, "President Reagan has asked Congress to approve an additional \$60 million in military aid for El Salvador. Do you think Congress should or should not approve this request?"

| | |
|------------|-----|
| YES | 22% |
| NO | 68% |
| NO OPINION | 10% |

September 1983

Roper poll: "Send increased military aid to El Salvador to help its government fight against the leftist guerrillas."

| | |
|-----|-----|
| YES | 29% |
| NO | 59% |

February 1984

Roper poll: "Send increased military aid to El Salvador to help its government fight against the leftists guerrillas."

| | |
|-----|-----|
| YES | 32% |
| NO | 58% |

Drifting Toward Totalitarianism:

A Report on the Nicaraguan Elections

The Nicaraguan elections last fall could have been a road to peace in a wartorn country, a stepping back from the slide towards totalitarianism. They were not.

HUMBERTO BELLI

THE NOVEMBER 4 PRESIDENTIAL election in Nicaragua has drawn remarkably little attention. The arrival of a Soviet ship at Port Corinto on November 7 initiated the "crisis" between the United States and Nicaragua which has been preoccupying the media. The elections have slipped quietly out of view. No doubt the Sandinistas would have it that way. With almost everyone calling their bluff, they stood only to lose additional ground from continued focus on the elections.

It is important to analyze the elections, however, for they provide insight into the nature of the Sandinistas regime and to its intended direction. But before going into the implications of the elections let us first state some basic facts about the way in which they took place.

Basic fact number one is that there were no true choices. The Sandinistas succeeded in eliminating by force or voluntary exclusion all real alternatives. Their "opponents" in the elections were a cluster of tiny, splinter party candidates, most of whom were Marxist and most of whom were close allies of the government. Among the significant political leaders who were either outlawed or exiled were men such as Alfonso Robelo, former member of the Sandinista government junta and head of the National Democratic Movement (MDN), of center-left orientation; Adolfo Calero, president of the large Conservative party, imprisoned by Somoza in 1979; Eden Pastora, former head of the Sandinista militia and hero in the war against Somoza; Wilfredo Montalvan, head of the Social Democratic Party; Brooklyn Rivera and Stedman Fagoth, the top leaders of the Miskito Indians; Jose Davila, a Somoza antagonist who is head of the Social Christian Party; and Edgard Macias, former viceminister of labor in the Sandinista government and head of the People's Social Christian Party.

The Sandinistas denied these men participation in the elections on the grounds that they were "criminals" who have supported the armed struggle against the present

regime (some have; some have not). The Sandinistas also brand them "Somocistas," a charge obviously at odds with their political past but which is often echoed by some foreign journalists.

Those leaders who have fought against the current government had offered to lay down their arms if allowed to participate in the elections. But a call at Easter 1984 by the Nicaraguan Catholic bishops, asking for reconciliation among all Nicaraguans and for dialogue between the Sandinistas and the rebels, was rejected by the government with the utmost hostility. The bishops received epithets such as "criminals" and "traitors." Sergio Ramirez, a member of the Sandinista junta, announced that with the "contras" there would only be dialogue "through the barrels of guns."

The Sandinistas' flat rejection of any reconciliation or dialogue had international and domestic repercussions. In the United States, Senator Edward Kennedy said that the Sandinistas' words were not those of people who are genuinely pledged to pluralism.

In Nicaragua the Sandinistas' refusal of dialogue led to the boycott of the remaining independent political forces, together represented by Arturo Cruz, himself a former ambassador of the Sandinista regime to Washington. Among these forces were the Social Christian Party, the Conservative Democratic Party, the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, and the two independent labor organizations still functioning in the country: the Nicaraguan Workers Center (CTN) and the United Confederation of Labor (CUS).

The Sandinistas tried to fill the political vacuum thus created by resorting to a tactic used by the Somoza regime: induce the participation of minor political figures, especially people from the figures of the major political parties. Nicaraguans scornfully called such candidates "zancudos," that is, "mosquitoes," a term expressing their smallness and lack of true bite.

The "mosquito" candidates enlisted by the Sandinistas were from several small parties. The Nicaraguan Socialist

Party, a Marxist-Leninist organization of unknown membership, the Nicaraguan Communist Party, a recent splinter party that separated from the Sandinistas; the People's Christian Social Party, an organization that broke with Edgard Macias' larger party in 1982, when Macias objected to the road being taken by the Sandinistas and was forced into exile; the Peoples' Action Movement, a Maoist organization that worked under the Sandinista Front during the insurrection against Somoza; and the Conservative Democratic Party. This last party is a splinter organization formed a few months before the elections when the major Conservative Democratic Party decided not to participate. This splinter organization claimed the name of the parent organization and, not surprisingly, the Nicaraguan Supreme Court, which is controlled by the Sandinistas, granted the use of the name Conservative Democratic party to the newly created organization.

The party with the most political clout coming into the elections was the Liberal Independent Party, led by Virgilio Godoy. But Godoy dropped out of the race just weeks before election day on the grounds that the minimum prerequisites for a free contest had not been met by the Sandinistas.

Basic fact number two is that there was coercion of both the public and the politicians. There was, to begin with, the state of emergency. The Sandinistas had promised to lift the state of emergency, but only partially. Individuals were thus deprived of most of their rights and personal guarantees. People could be arrested without trial and held incommunicado for lengthy periods. In addition, Nicaraguans were also subjected to the omnipresent control exerted by the Sandinista Defence Committees (CCDS). These are partisan, paramilitary organizations established by the Sandinistas since 1979 on every neighborhood block in the urban areas. The CCDS's, called the "eyes and ears of the revolution," have as their primary function to spy on the surrounding neighborhoods, to report any "suspicious activities," to enforce night watch, while requesting the "voluntary" participation of the local citizens. Most important, the CCDS's issue the rationing coupons that enable Nicaraguans to buy their food from the state-controlled supermarkets, and the CCDS's collaborate with the People's Courts for the summary prosecution of alleged "counterrevolutionaries."

The pervasive effects of these networks of control were intensified by the way dissent is defined in Sandinista Nicaragua. "Counterrevolutionaries" may not only be those who openly disagree with the policies of the regime but *whoever fails to support them*. As recent history, in which not even the Pope has been immune to harassment, has shown, life for the so easily defined opponents of the revolution may be rough. There are no death squads in Nicaragua. But journalists have been jailed, kidnapped, and beaten; churches have been stormed by government-organized mobs; priests have been beaten and expelled — 16 so far;

Rather than a first, faltering step toward democracy, the elections were the most that the Sandinistas could offer in terms of political openness and tolerance toward dissent.

Christian lay leaders have been murdered, have "disappeared," and have been tortured in the countryside, especially in remote areas; headquarters of independent labor unions and parties have been attacked; radio stations have been vandalized; and peaceful rallies of political parties have been broken up by force.

If these were hardly acceptable conditions for free elections, the curtailment of freedom of expression made things even worse. These subjected to abuse or arbitrary actions by the government had no outlet to voice their grievances. Complaints of human rights violations have been customarily censored in Nicaragua, and in general, the Ministry of the Interior prevents political and social critics or commentators from speaking out. This fact not only shields from criticism the coercion that citizens experience in various walks of life, but it renders the regime's political opponents practically powerless to reach out to the public. Even today, Catholic Church officials must submit their homilies to state censorship prior to radio broadcasting. Television is a party monopoly: it belongs to the Sandinista Party, which, in addition, controls nearly all the radio stations and two of the three newspapers in the country. Through this control of the mass media, the Sandinistas attacked their opponents and propagandized their goals and accomplishments in a ceaseless bombardment of insults, chants, and slogans.

Basic fact number three is that *due to the melding of state and party, true pluralism was necessarily precluded*. Even since the first days of the revolutionary regime, the boundaries between the two have been erased. Youths, do not join the Nicaraguan Army but the Sandinista Party's Army. The name "Sandinista" is not a general patriotic label; it is legally reserved for party organizations. Thus, the television, the police, the CCDS's and mass organizations which are funded by the state, all of which bear the title Sandinista, officially belong to the Sandinista Party. The party's budget cannot be separated from the state's (the reason, perhaps, why the state's budget is kept secret). The Sandinista Party, thus, is not a party that stands before the law and the state on an equal footing with the others. Instead, it is an armed party, funded by the state — and thereby by the taxes of all citizens, a party whose power and privileges far outweigh the leverage of any other political organization. One reason

the Sandinistas lowered the voting age to 16 years is because the forced enrollment of the Nicaraguan youth in the party's army kept a large segment of the population confined to barracks — and to the daily indoctrination of the party's political officers.

Basic fact number four — that there were no safeguards against fraud. There was no sound preregistration system for voters, and Nicaraguans lack any standard ID. Often, they had no ID at all, precluding the possibility of electronic tabulation. The ballots, on the other hand were to be counted by committees on which Sandinista delegates had decisive majorities. The Supreme Electoral Council was headed by three Sandinista officials: Mariano Fiallos, Leonel Arguello, and Amada Pineda (all with membership cards in the Sandinista Party). Requests by the opposition political organizations to have the elections supervised by the Organization of American States or some other respected international organization were turned down by the Sandinistas.

It is no wonder, then, in view of all these considerations, that the elections in Nicaragua were regarded with widespread skepticism. But while there was wide international agreement that the Nicaraguan elections hardly deserved to be called by the name, there was, at the same time, disagreement as to how to interpret the election procedure and what to expect in the future from the Nicaraguan political process.

A view expressed by some observers admitted that the elections were seriously flawed, but laid much of the culpability for the flaws on the difficult circumstances that the Sandinistas have been facing. The less sophisticated form of this position holds that most of the problems with the Nicaraguan electoral process were a direct result of U.S. pressure. The more sophisticated form claims that we could not expect a Swiss kind of democracy developing so soon in an underdeveloped country devoid of a democratic tradition and ravaged by civil war. Hence, despite shortcomings, the elections in Nicaragua should be considered a hopeful event, a positive step toward democracy. And, carrying this position one step further, some argue that provided the right circumstances — namely, external friendship and economic aid — the Sandinistas might evolve toward elections with a more acceptable level of political pluralism.

This is an attractive view to democratically minded people. Would that the elections were the first fruits of an evolution toward democracy! A careful reading of the politics of the Nicaraguan elections, however, not only does not support this conclusion but, in fact, leads in the opposite direction.

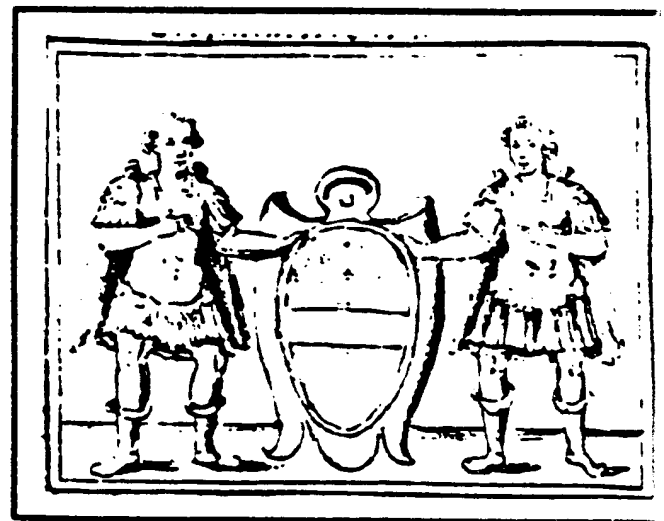
Rather than a first, though faltering, step toward democracy, the elections, as held, were the very most that the Sandinistas could offer in terms of political openness and tolerance toward dissent. *It is well to keep in mind that the Sandinista government did not want to have this election in the first place.* They did so only after external pressure had become so intense that continued delay was no longer

strategically viable. In fact, it was the closed fist and not an open hand from the U.S. which prompted the Sandinistas to engage, however imperfectly, in a political process they ultimately abhor. (Defense Minister Humberto Ortega declared in 1981 that elections in Nicaragua would not be like elections in the United States and other "bourgeois countries"; rather, they would be used "to select the best among the revolutionary vanguard.")

It was no coincidence that the Sandinistas began to relax elections and censorship of the press shortly after the U.S. invaded Grenada. That invasion sent shock waves through the Nicaraguan government. Convinced that they would be next, the Sandinistas moved quickly to beef up their public image with talk of democracy and pluralism and to set a date for elections. How could the U.S. invade a country only a matter of months from its first elections? That all this talk of democracy was simply a smokescreen is made clear by the remarks of Bayardo Arce, one of Nicaragua's nine commandantes. In a secret speech to the central committee of the Nicaraguan Socialist Party — a pro-Soviet Communist group — Arce said:

If it were not for the state of war forced on us . . . the electoral problem would be something completely out of step in terms of usefulness. What the revolution (the Sandinista government) truly needs is the power to take action. And this power to take action is what constitutes the essence of the dictatorship of the proletariat . . . so, the election is, from this point of view, a hindrance.

(Concerning what to expect in the future, Arce added:



ELECTIONS...Continued

"We are discussing first, the idea of putting an end to all this artifice of pluralism ... which has been useful to us up to now."

What measure of political pluralism and free expression that could be found in Nicaragua in the three months prior to the elections was the cost the Sandinistas were paying to buy some legitimacy for fear of their own survival. It is particularly ominous that even under this fear of invasion, the Sandinistas gave in so little. With the Western media watching and waiting for signs of a democratic process, they kept press censorship alive, harassed opponents, and failed to meet even the moderate demands for fairness for which democratic opponents like Arturo Cruz were asking. Probably they could not afford more freedom. What little the Sandinistas gave was the most they could ever give without jeopardizing their hold on power — foreign pressure notwithstanding.

Now that the elections are over, there is already a resurgence of repression. Quite probably most of the hubbub the Sandinistas stirred up over the alleged "imminent" U.S. invasion was a pretext for crushing the little breathing space that they temporarily allowed before the elections. They have already tightened their grip again on the in-

dependent newspaper *La Prensa*, have militarized the high school students engaged in the coffee harvest, forbade the live broadcasting of religious sermons, and denied exit visas to 26 prominent Nicaraguans.

The Nicaraguan elections could have been a road to peace in a tired, war-torn country. They could have signaled a change in the Sandinistas relentless march to totalitarianism. They could have been a new beginning. They were not. In the end, the elections were a propaganda show, and a not very good one at that. The march to totalitarianism continues.

Humberto Belli is the former editorial-page editor of the independent Nicaraguan newspaper La Prensa. Once a collaborator with the Sandinistas, Mr. Belli converted to Christianity in 1977. He left Nicaragua in 1982, after the imposition of total press censorship. Mr. Belli is now Director of the Puebla Institute, an independent, non-profit center seeking Christian responses to the social issues facing Latin America. He is the author of Nicaragua: Christians Under Fire, available from the Puebla Institute (P.O. 520, Garden City, Michigan 48135).